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WAS PETRARCH AN OPIUM-EATER?

It is well known that a majority of the great poets in all the ages have indulged more or less freely in the stimulation of alcoholic liquors ; so much so that it is a problem as inevitable as it is curious, how much of the ideated substance of *Childe Harold*, *Lalla Rookh*, *Prometheus Bound* and the rest that have stirred the wondering applause of mankind is the spiritual product of physically digested wine or stronger liquors.

From the testimony of such men as Coleridge and De Quincy, representative opium-eaters, we learn that there is available another material agent of still greater power of intellectual and moral stimulation. And although the pathological history of the early ages is to a great degree obscure and unknown, it is certain that the very unique virtues of this agent were well known and its use as an indulgence established long before Petrarch's day not only in the East generally but in medieval Italy as well.

We find, indeed, no statement in credible history, nor is there, as in the case of Homer, any tradition that the great Sonneteer stimulated his powers by imbibing the juice of the poppy ; but there are peculiar indications not a few of which seem to point very distinctly that way ; and on the authority of expert opium-eaters, to offer a plausible explanation of many of the often observed but feebly explained idiosyncracies and corruscations which so often enhalo the sentiments and architecturate the forms especially in the sonnets of Laura.

To begin with that strange kind of platonism beautifully auroral, cool as that of the fine old Philosopher himself, while charged with a splendid pyrotechnic that would have set the Greek aghast ; how explain so much apparent fire of passion, so much seeming blaze of sensuous splendor, all of which, nevertheless, engenders so little heat ?

The experts affirm that opium, while more powerfully exalting, produces results very different and very distinguishable from those of alcohol. In a comparison of this exaltation with the result of alcoholic stimulation by the various forms of liquors, the profoundly experienced opium-eater De Quincy says :

"The main distinction between exaltation by opium and intoxication by liquors, lies in this, that whereas wine disorders the mental faculties, opium, on the contrary (if taken in a proper manner), introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation and harmony. . . . A man who is inebriated, or tending to inebriation, is, and feels that he is, in a condition which calls up into supremacy the merely human, too often the brutal part of his nature ; but the opium-eater feels that the diviner part of his nature is paramount ; . . . and over all is the great light of the majestic intellect."

Now apart from the transcendent beauties of expression, no quality is more clearly in evidence throughout the *Canzoniere*, than the absence of "*the human, too often the brutal*," which De Quincy differentiates as the result of wine-drinking—in the Poet's own words :

"*Apprizing little that which every man desires.*"

As the best illustration of this fundamental feature of the *Canzoniere*—this non-enkindling fire of passion—I have had the good fortune to find how this quality strikes the apprehension of a distinguished representative of the more sensitive sex. In the correspondence of Professor Fernand Brisset, author of one of the many attempted chronological re-arrangements of Petrarch's sonnets, is a letter from a lady, a great admirer of Petrarch, from which I quote a few analogous paragraphs. She says :

"Thanks to the dates indicated by you, I am delighted to be able to make live again the phases of this wonderful love. I feel born in my woman heart the fancy of being Laura and of allowing myself to be seduced by the lays of the Poet. I knew—his *Epistle to Posterity* had told me so—that he was of an agreeable figure, always superlatively groomed, and I was not ignorant of his fine estates.

"I opened, then, the *Canzoniere* with something of the emotion we feel in reading poems of love addressed to ourselves and set myself to reading slowly. The first sonnets gave me a chill ; the fifth a fit of laughter at his infantile word-play ; the twelfth seemed to me an odd conceit and I did not at all comprehend why it would be easier for the Poet to declare his love of me if, instead of being young and beautiful, I were old and ugly.

"At the thirteenth, however, my heart began to palpitate ; a poet was talking to me, a poet who was beginning to love me as his sublime inspirer ought to be loved and who in the infinities of his love was getting glimpses of the infinities of heaven."

The sonnet the lady here refers to is that known in the indexes as :

“*Quando fra l'altre donne ad ora ad ora*”

XIII of Vat. mss. No. 3195.

When 'mong the other ladies now and then
Comes Love resplendent on her face so fair,
As much as all, than she, less lovely are,
So much desire enkindles me again.
I bless the place, the hour, the moment when
My eyes on sight so lofty fixèd were,
And say : ‘My soul, thou must warm thanks declare
For that thou wast so honored ’bove all men.
From her comes to thee living truth of love
Which leads thee, following, toward celestial quires,
Apprizing nought what every man desires ;
From her the uplifting goodness which aspires,
Escorting heavenward, while I swiftly move ;
So that I’m drawn by every hope above.’

“All in a thrill I continued my reading on the verge of falling in love. Consulting your dates I found there had been three years since the Poet saw me for the first time and I had received from him but thirteen sonnets, only one of which was capable of moving me ! That is, during the blessed period when the heart awakes to love, when the most earthly feel a particle of the infinite penetrating their souls, this is all he found to say to me—that poet of twenty-three years ! I must think he loves me very little.

“No, I’m wrong ; if he hasn’t yet celebrated my beauty it is because he loves me too much and that I am too beautiful. He tells me so in the XX sonnet ; must I believe it?”

The sonnet to which the lady here refers is that known in the indexes as :

“*Vergognando talor ch’ ancor si taccia,*”

XX of Vat. mss. No. 3195.

Ashamed sometimes that no applauding rhyme
Thy beauty yet has waked, nor stirred a line
To warble, Lady, and thy charms enshrine,
Yet mindful memory recalls the time
That sight made later charms of others dim.
But ’t were a heavy work ; the needs combine
Far, far beyond all shaping powers of mine ;
My genius, chilled, faints at the thought sublime.
Yes, more than once, those beauties to rehearse
My lips were opened, but within my breast
The struggling voice was locked and silent lay.
I more than once began to scribble verse,
But pen, nor hand, nor thought a word expressed,
Helpless and overpowered at first essay.

“Believe it, no ! I do not think he is incapable of writing ; but I well understand that he is incapable of loving. It is not thus that he will succeed in touching my heart.”

Of this eminent feature of the Petrarchan strain—a quality notoriously unlike the hot and unruly tone of Anacreon, of Horace and of the whole line up and down the ages of wine-inebriated lovers, which is emphatically, according to the dictum of the great modern Opium-eater, a specific characteristic of the anæsthetic exaltation—De Quincy says again :

“Opium, like wine, gives an expansion to the heart, but with this remarkable difference, that, in the development of kindheartedness which accompanies inebriation, the sensual creature is uppermost. The expansion of the benign feelings incident to opium is no febrile access, but a healthy restoration to a state where the impulses of the heart are just and good.”

All this is exactly true of the *Canzoniere*. Other words could not better describe the character of the amorous sentiment expressed there in language not less morally immaculate, than radiant with the rhetorical splendors and almost celestial melody of the great Sonneteer of the ages ; while yet his love is not a sensuality, like that of the erotic poets ; while it is an ecstasy, and the language in which it is clothed is not, like theirs, unmixed human (when not indecent), but is a noble elevation of the human into the region of the divine ; while it has an ideality, a serenity, a purity, a melodious sweetness which cannot be described nor imitated nor translated.

At the same time,—and this is a most necessary observation,—this absence of wine-heated desire and wine-heated expression is by no means the outshadowing of a merely Platonic sentiment. The Platonic is an abstraction abiding wholly in the spiritual and the intellectual. On the contrary, it is the body of Laura, not as a figure of speech but as a real woman of flesh and blood, which enlivens and amplifies Petrarch’s imagination. Laura is modest and chaste and lovely in temper and adorned with every virtue ; but it is not these abstractions which move the lover and inspire the poet. It is Laura of the blond locks, of the milk-white neck, of the beautiful hand, of the blushing cheeks, of the sweet face, of the eyes of heavenly blue and full of love-inspiring fire. It is the woman whom he locates and treats in a thousand varying ways and of whom he is forever making a new picture set in the midst of some beautiful landscape, a verdant plain, a rain of

flowers, a murmuring of waters ; in the words of De Sanctis, "all nature made an echo of Laura." He loves that gentle spirit which turns upon him those eyes, which dictates those thrilling words, but it is the real woman-form clothing this spirit which holds his love in perennial flame.

Turn to the Sonnet known in the indexes as :

"*Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi,*"

XC of Vat. MSS. No. 3195.

Her tresses of gold in the zephyr were streaming
And on them a thousand sweet nodules it turned ;
And the charming eye-flashes marvellously burned
Of those beautiful eyes, now so faint in their gleaming ;
The colors of pity all seemed to be beaming
On her beautiful face ; what wonder the flame
Burned in my fond heart always the same,
Whether 't was true, or I was but dreaming ?
Her heavenly port shadowed nothing below,
But mated the step of the angels above ;
And the sound of her voice had no human ring.
'T was a heavenly spirit, illumined with love,
That I saw ; but if not, unbending the bow
To the wound once inflicted no soundness will bring.

Very neatly, in expounding the joint operation of "the great light of the majestic intellect" which De Quincy attributes to opium, overriding in Petrarch "the brutal part of his nature," De Sanctis says in his ingenious way :

"The spirit [of the poetry] remains pure reflection or abstract intellect and the will has no power of putting itself in action, through the conflict which it finds in the imagination. The imagination remains pure imagination and has no power upon the will, does not labor to realize its own sweet fancies, through the conflict it finds in reflection. If one of the two forces had been able to subdue the other, there would have arisen equilibrium and peace ; but the two forces struggle without any result and there is never arrival at a manly 'I will' ; there is within the soul the 'Yes' and also the 'No' in eternal strife. Therefore the life never comes out in any result, in any action, but remains pregnant of thoughts and imaginations wholly internal. This wavering imbecility of the will De Quincy reports as a prominent characteristic of the anæsthetic exaltation ; and hardly a more distinct modern example could be imagined than the splendid but inconsecutive, inconsistent work of the opium-eating author of *Kubla Khan*.

For one of many illustrations of this striking feature in the *Canzoniere* let us turn to the much discussed sonnet known in the indexes as :

"*Pace non trovo e non ho da far guerra,*"

CXXXIV of Vat. MSS. No. 3195.

I find no peace, yet have for war no place ;
I fly to heaven, yet lie upon the ground ;
I nothing grasp, yet all the world embrace ;
I fear, yet hope, I burn, yet ice am found.
Love neither locks my cell, nor gives me grace,
Nor holds me his, nor yet dissolves the bond ;
Nor kills me, nor sets free a living space,
Nor wills me life, nor saves me from my wound.
Eyeless I see, tongueless I scream the while ;
I crave to die, yet beg help in the strife ;
I hate myself, another love most true.
I nourish me on grief, weeping I smile ;
I am displeased alike with death and life.
In this state am I, woman, all for you.

Again, especially in the later compositions, so far as the date of composition is determinable, there is, together with the auroral splendor of the representation always present, a certain gloomy foreboding merging into melancholy. Apropos to this, narrating jocosely some of his first experiences with opium-eating, De Quincy says :

"But if I talk in this way the reader will think I am laughing ; and I can assure him that nobody will laugh long who deals much with opium. Its pleasures even are of a grave and solemn complexion ; and in his happiest state the opium-eater cannot present himself in the character of *L'Allegro* ; even then he speaks and thinks as becomes *Il Penseroso*."

Describing his later experiences with opium he says :

"The Opium-eater loses none of his moral sensibilities, or aspirations ; he wishes and longs as earnestly as ever to realize what he believes possible and feels to be exacted by duty ; but his intellectual apprehension of what is possible infinitely outruns even his power to attempt. . . . This and all other changes in my dreams, were accompanied by a deep-seated anxiety and gloomy melancholy."

For a representative sonnet among the supposed later compositions, going to show the marked difference from every tone of the wine-inspired erotics, let us turn, among scores of similar ones, to that sweet but mournful augury of dreamland,

laden with fear and dark pictures of thought,
known in the indexes as :

“*Qual paura ho quando mi torna a mente,*”
CCXLIX of Vat. mss. No. 3195.

What fear I have when my sad mind reviews
That day I left my Lady grave with thought
And with her all my heart ! yet there is nought
On which so oft, so glad, I love to muse.

Mid ladies fair my vision then renews
Her standing with a rose's splendor fraught
Mid minor blooms, to joy, nor sorrow brought,
Like one who fears, yet no foreboding brews.

Of her accustomed cheer she was bereft,
Her pearls, her garlands and her dainty clothes,
Her laughter and her song and prattle sweet.

So my own life in painful doubt I left.
Now auguries sad, dark thoughts and dreams oppose
My yearning hopes, may God their fury cheat.

Again another dictum of the great modern
Opium-eater comes to throw an illumination on
a peculiar feature of the activities of the great
medieval Sonneteer. De Quincy says : “To the
opium-eater, when in the divinest state incident
to his enjoyment, crowds became an oppression ;
even music too sensual and gross. He naturally
seeks solitude and silence, as indispensable condi-
tions of those trances, or profoundest reveries,
which are the crown and consummation of what
opium can do for human nature.”

Now there is no feature in the life of the Tuscan
Poet more marked than his tendency—apparently
a created, a super-induced tendency—toward se-
clusion. His natural temper was restless, keeping
him, from choice, perpetually on the wing ; but
in his perpetual journeys he was always shunning
the society of men ; and with every pause shut-
ting himself away in some one of his many homes.
To say nothing of the rest, he was ever glorifying
Vaucluse [Shut-Valley], sought out by him and
exquisitely fitted up for seclusion ; and where the
greater part of his effusions on Laura were com-
posed.

Turn to the Sonnet, reckoned by all the greater
critics as certainly the most characteristic, and
perhaps, all values considered, the superlative of
all the sonnets of Petrarch, known in the indexes
as :

“*Solo e pensoso i più deserti campi,*”
XXXV of Vat. mss. No. 3195.

Alone and pensive each most desert strand
I measure through with paces dull and slow

And, with eyes all intent for flight, I go
Where no dread human step imprints the sand.
No other mean I find, no other brand
To guard from men my too transparent woe ;
Because all acts of mirth are vanished so,
That how within, all in a blaze I stand,
Is read abroad ; and now each mount and shore
And stream and wood my vital tempers share,
From others hidden to wild nature plain.
Yet paths so thorny, savageries so sore,
I cannot find but Love comes faring there
His fires to breathe and I respond again.

It may, perhaps, also be added here in paren-
thesis that old Homer, who, as tradition has it,
was himself an opium-eater, recognizes this ten-
dency in certain similarly exalted states, as in the
case of Bellerophon, told in the VI Book of the
Iliad.¹

Among other indications which it were easy to
point out, I will mention but one more which is
strikingly apparent throughout the *Canzoniere*.
I mean the utterly fragmentary, or better, spo-
radic character of the *Canzoniere* itself. And it
adds to the pertinency of this indication to be
reminded also of the familiar observation that
the sonnet, above every other poetic form, affords
the faculty for fragmentary expression, for briefly
yet completely deploying a sporadic thought in
fourteen curiously intertangled lines. Hence no
other form is so expressly suited to the majestic
but sporadic results of the anæsthetic exaltation.
And hence, again, assuming that opium was the
exalting agent, what other so plausible reason
could be found for the determination of this form
by the great Sonneteer of the ages ?

In point of fact, the *Canzoniere* is like a string
of pearls of infinitely multifarious hues, each
rounded and polished with consummate art, and
all held together by the slender thread of Laura's
name. And yet even this string of pearls does
not flow in an open, disinvolved course, but is
like a tangled skein of ever returning and cross-
ing threads.

The most striking illustration in modern times
of this sporadic characteristic—excepting De

¹ “But when at last distracted in his mind,
Forsook by heaven, forsaking human kind,
Wide o'er the Aleian field he chose to stray,
A long, forlorn, uncomfortable way.”

Pope's translation.

Quincy himself—has been found in the opium-eating Samuel Taylor Coleridge whose remains are too familiar in this regard to be more than named in passing. De Quincy, apropos to this characteristic, says: "Opium, like the bee that extracts its materials indiscriminately from roses and from the soot of chimneys, can overrule all [accidental] feelings into a compliance with the master-key."

The whole *Canzoniere*, as I have said, is a continuous illustration of it in Petrarch. The momentary sentiment ruling in any one sonnet may as likely as not be just as naturally, as forcefully, as beautifully and as momentarily contradicted in the next. But for one of a hundred confessions of it let us turn to the famous sonnet known in the indexes as:

"*S' amor non è, che dunque è quel ch' io sento ?*"
CXXXII of Vat. mss. No. 3195.

If 't is not love, what is this thrill so fleet?
But if 't is love, good heavens! what is that thing?
If good, whence does the deadly bitter spring?
If criminal, why punishment so sweet?
If willingly, why with lamenting greet?
If 'gainst my will, what helps my whimpering?
O living death, O luscious suffering,
What can you do, if I refuse, discreet?
If I consent, unrighteously I mourn.
Mid struggling winds I ride in pinnace frail,
All reft of sail and rudder, helpless rolled;
So witless, error-laden to the rail,
That I myself know nothing why I burn
In winter, in midsummer shake with cold.

In a word, if the anæsthetic solution be accepted, it does away with a goodly number of otherwise unanswered queries, clears the critical sky of a good deal of rather murky philosophizing, and leaves in its place the easily comprehensible idea of a man of very extraordinary genius and very extraordinary culture, but a man while endowed, indeed, in fullness of sensibility with the common passions of humanity, yet one who under a mighty exaltation *feels the diviner part of his nature to be paramount to the human*,

"Apprizing little that which every man desires,"
and over all which blazes *the great light of the majestic intellect*.

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POE AS AN EPICUREAN.

Since Gassendi and Dalton have made the Democritean theory of the atomic constitution of matter, transmitted by Epicurus, the basis of modern chemical and physical science, Epicurean physics has been rescued somewhat from the ridicule bestowed upon it by contemporary critics and become a heritage of recognized value to later scientific thought. "*Res tota ficta pueriliter*," says Cicero, but the 'picked phrase of Tully's' contempt the modern must apply with more discrimination. Yet however much Lucretius may win our respect for the theories of Epicurus, which he has so skillfully cast into lucid Latin verse, even a modern may decry his master's ethics and venture a laugh at the Epicurean gods, whose nature the later adherents of the school report either with inconsiderate brevity, or with the ludicrous obscurity of muddled thinking.

In the dialogue of Cicero, "On the Nature of the Gods," Velleius, the Epicurean, with characteristic assumption essays the theme, in Stoic and Academic company, but fails so utterly to make intelligible or rationally convincing his conception of their atomic constitution, that the passage has passed from his auditors to us as a legacy of bewilderment and irreverent jest. "*Hoc, per ipsos deos, de quibus loquimur*," cries Cotta, "*quale tandem est!*"

The life of the listless, shadowy gods of the intermundane spaces, where "neither winds do shake nor clouds drench with rains nor snow congealed by sharp frosts harms with hoary fall," Lucretius exalts as the perfect type of Epicurean *ἀραξία*. Why, with his noble passion for truth established by an appeal to reason and a zeal for science only to make her serve theology, he should have been content merely to dogmatize on the nature of the gods and have left unfulfilled his promise of copious explanation of their subtle material nature, remains a matter of conjecture. Perhaps the task was too difficult to be executed with his characteristic confidence or, perhaps, as suggested by the exceedingly confused ideas of later Epicureans, their master, content with his concession to popular belief which his acknowledgment of their existence implied, left